WHAT MAKES A CITY SAFE
VIABLE COMMUNITY SAFETY STRATEGIES THAT DO NOT RELY ON POLICE OR PRISONS

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Divesting from police and prisons is not only compatible with reducing interpersonal violence in communities; it is also necessary. To understand why, we must consider the sources of violence.

Rather than being reducible merely to a person's character, interpersonal violence is systematically produced by institutions, laws, and practices that harm groups of people and shape the conditions of their lives. At a societal level, interpersonal violence emerges as a collective result made nearly inevitable by systemic barriers to living wages, clean water, or nourishing food; underfunded schools; and poor health and mental health infrastructure. This set of conditions—chosen explicitly or implicitly by society and carried out in policy and practice—is called structural violence because deprivation and poor health are themselves instances of grave harm.

One of the harms such inequity causes is that it creates the conditions known to generate interpersonal violence. Until American society decides to invest in structural solutions, inequity will continue fueling the fire of violence like a hose full of gasoline.

This paper is the starting place for any conversation about public safety. The authors describe long-standing and effective strategies to address violence grounded in public health, economic wellbeing, community power, healing, and accountability.

VIABLE COMMUNITY SAFETY STRATEGIES

1. Address violence as a public health concern.
Medical and public health researchers have long recognized violence as a public health crisis. If we want to stop violence, we need to promote public health and safety. Public health approaches to addressing violence include credible messenger and violence interruption programs and hospital-based programs.

2. Address inequity and meet people's needs for economic wellbeing.
Many violence intervention programs include economic stability—helping to meet people's basic needs—as a key component of stopping violence. Employment and economic opportunities, parks and recreation facilities that allow people to socialize and build strong networks, quality schools, and accessible opportunities for cultural and artistic expression prevent community violence.

3. Organize and build power to shift resources and promote community safety.
Addressing structural violence comes down to deciding how resources are spent—which means it comes down to power. Organizers across the country provide models for how we can shift resources away from policing and incarceration and toward institutions, infrastructure, and programs that make communities safer.

4. Heal pain.
Addressing violence in ways that do not center punishment leads us to consider differently the needs of those harmed by it. This is not labor the criminal punishment system can or should do. Investing in healing work affirms the value of the person who was harmed and the values of the community that were breached when that person was hurt.

5. Transform harm.
Prevention and healing work are critical, but we will not prevent all violence, and healing is not the only need that arises from an act of harm. At least for now, people will continue to harm each other, and communities and society will need methods of addressing harm when it occurs. Among the most effective accountability methods are restorative and transformative justice processes. □